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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAMA 000871

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: KING DISCUSSES DOMESTIC, REGIONAL ISSUES WITH GEN. ABIZAID

REF: A. MANAMA 859 B. MANAMA 855

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (b) (d)

1. (C) Summary. Bahrain's King Hamad reaffirmed to visiting CENTCOM CDR Abizaid June 18 his position that any amendments to the constitution should be done by the legislature, not the King; intervention by the King to entice participation in next year's election would weaken, not strengthen Bahrain's fledgling democratic institutions. He expressed satisfaction that the June 17 demonstration for constitutional reform had proceeded peacefully and with smaller numbers. He worried about Iranian influence in Bahraini politics. On Iraq, he urged that Iraqi forces be given a more prominent role to gain the experience and confidence they need. Commenting on last week's Abu Mazan visit, the King said Bahrain has no problem developing relations with Israel if the Palestinians want and ask Bahrain to do so. End Summary.

2. (U) During a luncheon hosted for visiting USCENTCOM CDR Gen. John Abizaid on June 18, King Hamad discussed a wide range of domestic and regional issues. Also attending the lunch on the Bahrain side were Crown Prince Shaikh Salman and Minister of Defense Shaikh Khalifa.

3. (C) The King discussed at some length Bahrain's domestic political scene, including the prospects for getting opposition political societies, who boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections, to participate in the 2006 elections. Noting that the opposition societies are asking the King to intervene to amend the constitution as a condition for participation, the King said that he is trying to build and strengthen institutions, including the Parliament, in Bahrain. Whenever someone has a problem in Bahrain, however, they want the King to intervene to resolve the issue. How can institutions be strengthened if the King intervenes every time, rather than letting the institutions tackle the issue, he asked. "I am committed to democracy," he stated. "It can't fall back." But for the constitution to be amended, he said, the opposition parties must work through the parliament.

4. (C) Noting that the third opposition-organized demonstration for constitutional amendments had taken place in Hamad Town the day before, the King expressed satisfaction that the demonstrations were proceeding peacefully and in fact attracting lower numbers each time. He said he was happy that the demonstrators had heeded the government's request that they not carry foreign flags or pictures of foreign political figures, but criticized them for greatly inflating their claims of the number of participants at each demonstration.

5. (C) Asked about the impact of Washington's promotion in the region of political reform on Bahrain's efforts to advance democracy, the King said democracy is already advancing in the region. "It's being talked about in the press and in our speeches," he said. In Bahrain, he added, the public is long conditioned to talking about democracy. The first municipal elections were held in 1919. Women voted for the first time in Bahrain in 1923. Some countries in the region, like the UAE and Oman, will take longer to create public support for political reform, but Bahrain has a longer history of political activity.

6. (C) The King expressed concern about Iranian influence in Bahrain's elections, stating that when Iranian Judicial official Ayatollah Mahmood Hashemi Shahroodi visited Bahrain last month he had told Shia clerical leaders that the five percent ("khoms") contribution Shias give to the descendants of the Prophet (which normally goes to Qom in Iran or Nagaf in Iraq) could be retained in Bahrain to support Shia political candidates. (Note: This was likewise raised by Minister of Interior Shaikh Rashid in a conversation with the Ambassador last week -- reported ref a.)

7. (C) On regional issues, the King discussed Iraq and the recent visit to Bahrain of Palestinian President Abu Mazan. On Iraq, he urged that security responsibilities be turned over to the Iraqis as soon as possible. It just does not look right to see Americans patrolling the streets of Iraqi cities, he said. If the Iraqis continue to depend on the Americans, they will not gain the experience or the

confidence they need to maintain security. The Americans have already done so much; now they should recede into the background and let the Iraqis learn to fend for themselves, even if the Iraqis suffer some defeats in the short term. On the Abu Mazan visit last week (ref b), the King said he told Abu Mazan Bahrain is fully behind whatever the Palestinians do with Israel. He said that Bahrain has no problem with developing relations with Israel, if the Palestinians want them to.

MONROE